



- 1944 Patch

HISTORY OF MARINE ATTACK SQUADRON 542

VMA-542 "TIGERS"



-Current Patch

Marine Attack Squadron 542 was initially commissioned as Marine Night Fighter Squadron (VMF(N)-542) on March 6, 1944, at Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Cherry Point, NC. Upon commissioning, the squadron was assigned the F6F-3N "Hellcat". In the summer of 1944 the squadron was relocated to San Diego, CA in preparation for transfer to the Western Pacific war zone. Late in October, the squadron arrived at the newly created US Naval Base at Ulithi Atoll in the Caroline Islands and immediately began flying combat air patrols.

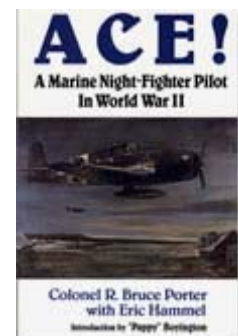
Later in 1944, VMF(N)-542 deployed to the Western Pacific War Zone to engage in combat operations against Imperial Japan. By early April 1945, most of the squadron was positioned in Okinawa, Japan to take part in the campaign to seize the remainder of the island. Night operations against the enemy began on April 15th with missions being flown from Yontan Airfield, Okinawa. Second Lieutenant Arcenaux had the honor of being the first aviator to down an enemy warplane with a night fighter on April 16, 1945. While stationed at Yontan, the "Tigers" were credited with destroying eighteen Japanese airplanes and carrying out rocket attacks on the Ryukyu Island chain of Amami, O'Shima, Tokuno Shima, Kakai Shima, Miyako Shima, and Amami Gunto. For these actions the "Tigers" were awarded the Presidential Unit Citation. Between April and August 1945, Major Robert B. Porter and Captain Wallace E. Sigler became the first night fighter aces on Okinawa.



- F6F-3N "Hellcat"



- Major Porter returning from a mission



- "ACE!" by Colonel Porter



It was during their time in the Western Pacific that VMF(N)-542 adopted the

kanji symbol for “tiger” that is seen throughout 542’s history. The symbol was found stamped on Japanese maps where tigers were known to be located. In other words, it was their way of saying “Tigers in the woods...BEWARE!” Today "Tigers" refer to this symbol simply as the "Kanji".

-The "Kanji"

Following a short tour of occupation duty at Yokosuka, Japan, VMF(N)-542 was transferred to MCAS El Toro, CA, aboard the USS San Saba. In El Toro, the "Tigers" were re-equipped with the newer F6F-5N "Hellcat". The "Tigers" flew the venerable dash 5N "Hellcat" until the end of World War II. Training during this period was oriented towards night and all-weather fighter tactics and resulted in the squadron being re-designated Marine Night All-Weather Fighter Squadron (VMF(AW)-542) in 1948.



- F6F-5N "Hellcat"

After receiving the new twin-engine, radar-upgraded F7F-3N "Tigercat", VMF(AW)-542 was ordered to Kimpo Airfield, Korea in September 1950. The "Tigers" were the first combat squadron to operate out of the airfield which had been recaptured just two days following the Inchon Invasion. Flying as many day missions as a day fighter squadron, while also flying throughout the night, 542 provided crucial support from the air as the Marines liberated Seoul and proceeded north of the 38th parallel.



- "Tigers" in Korea

In November 1950, VMF(AW)-542 was relocated to Yonp'o Airfield in order to assist the vastly outnumbered 1st Marine Division and Army 7th Division located at Chosin Reservoir. From December 1st to the 13th, the "Tigers" flew 127 missions, shot 38,305 20mm rounds, fired 534 5" rockets, and dropped 116 bombs in support of the ground forces. For their critical support at Chosin Reservoir, VMF(AW)-542 was awarded both the Navy and Army Presidential Unit Citations. On December 13th, the "Tigers" departed the airfield to continue combat operations from Itazuke Air Base, Japan. For their actions in the East Central Front in 1951, the "Tigers" received their third Presidential Unit Citation of the war.

Returning to El Toro, CA in March 1951, VMF(AW)-542 transitioned to jet age with the acquisition of the F3D-2 (F-10)



"Skynight". The "Skynight" was the first carrier-borne jet night fighter. The F3D-2 incorporated the APQ-35 search and acquisition radar for detecting enemy aircraft. The Tigers used the "Skynight" to train pilots and Radar Intercept Officers for duty in Korea. During the Korean War, more enemy aircraft were destroyed by F3D's than by all other Navy platforms.

- F3D-2 (F-10) "Skynight"



- F4D-1 (F-6A) "Skyray"

The squadron remained at MCAS El Toro, and in June 1958 accepted the supersonic, single engine (16,000 lbs. of thrust), afterburning, F4D-1 (F-6A) "Skyray" (affectionately known as the "Ford"). The "Skyray" set world time-to-climb records including a climb to 49,212 feet in 2 minutes, 36 seconds. On October 3, 1953 the F4D-1 became the first carrier capable aircraft to set the absolute world speed record by traveling 753 mph. The "Skyray" became the first U.S. Marine fighter capable of Mach 1 performance in level flight. The F4D-1 was nicknamed the "ten minute killer" due to its fast rate of climb, advanced interception capabilities, and formidable armament. This capability would allow the jet to climb, meet, and destroy its target in a matter of several minutes. Despite the "Skyray's" outstanding performance, the "Tigers" never fired the aircraft's guns in combat.

Between August 1959 and November 1963, VMF(AW)-542 made two extended deployments to Atsugi, Japan. On November 2, 1963, the Squadron was re-designated Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA-542) and began training in the F-4B "Phantom". During this time the "Phantom" set new absolute world speed records including 1606.5 mph at 125 feet. Time-to-height records were set including a climb to 98,425 feet in 6 minutes, 11 seconds.

As a result of the build-up of American involvement in the Vietnam War, VMFA-542 was ordered to Japan in April 1965, followed by redeployment to the Republic of Vietnam a few weeks later. The squadron initially entered the country at Da Nang Airfield on July 10, 1965 and commenced air operations against the enemy shortly thereafter. The squadron's primary mission was to provide air support to Marine ground forces.

In August 1965, VMFA-542 supported the 7th Marines in Operation STARLITE, the first major American operation of the war. The Squadron's first tour in South Vietnam ended in early December 1965 when it redeployed to Iwakuni, Japan. VMFA-542 spent three more tours in Southeast Asia. The "Tigers" returned to South Vietnam late in the winter of 1966 and remained until mid-summer the following year when they again moved to Japan. Beginning that fall, the "Tigers" began a thirteen-month deployment in the war zone. The "Tigers" last combat tour in Southeast Asia started on May 10, 1968.



- VMFA-542 F-4B "Phantoms" over Vietnam

While serving in Vietnam, the "Tigers" provided air support to ground forces in some of the largest land operations of the war. Included in these operations were: (1966) UTAH, TEXAS, (1967) PRAIRIE, UNION, KINGFISHER, FREMONT, (1968) ALLEN BROOK, NAPOLEON-SALINE, LANCASTER, SCOTLAND, (1969) NEVADA EAGLE, and IDAHO CANYON. Air support missions were not only flown on behalf of Marine ground personnel, but also for American Army units, South Vietnamese forces, and at times for elements of the South Korean Marine Corps. Additionally, the "Tigers" flew bombing missions in both Laos and North Vietnam. After the November 1968 bombing halt of North Vietnam, the "Tigers" flew escort for reconnaissance missions over that area. On the other hand, strikes against enemy targets in Laos increased after the bombing halt. Enemy supply lines in Laos were hit especially hard throughout 1969. VMFA-542 dropped over 20,000 tons of ordnance in Southeast Asia from May 1968 to January 1970. The last mission flown by the squadron was a night interdiction flight over Laos on January 13, 1970. The rest of the month was spent preparing to leave South Vietnam. On January 30, the first echelon took off from Da Nang; the second echelon left the next day. Included in this flight to the United States were thirty-five tactical jet aircraft. Code name for this major relocation of Marine F-4's was KEY WALLOP II. The route taken was as follows: Da Nang, Cubi Point, Republic of the Philippines, Guam, Wake Island, Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, and finally E1 Toro, CA. The squadron's arrival at its destination came on February 10 and 11, 1970. For their exemplary service in Vietnam, VMFA-542 was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation.

After the "Tigers" return to California, VMFA-542 was placed in a cadre status. In April, the strength of the unit was down to one officer. The squadron was eventually deactivated on June 30, 1970. However, the squadron's deactivation was short in duration as the squadron was reinstated a year and a half later. The "Tigers" rebirth occurred at MCAS Beaufort, SC on January 12, 1972. The squadron at this time received the designation of Marine Attack Squadron (VMA-542). Upon reactivation, the "Tigers" were assigned the new AV-8A "Harrier". The British designed "Harrier" employed radically advanced engineering of a concept known as Vertical/Short Takeoff and Land (V/STOL). The V/STOL capabilities of the AV-8A provided the Tigers with an expeditionary capability and flexibility that no other jet aircraft could match. As only the second squadron to adopt the "Harrier," the new VMA-542 began with a small staff in cadre status before it received its full complement of equipment and personnel.

During August of 1975 the "Tigers" were relocated to MCAS Cherry Point, NC and operated from an expeditionary airfield in support of Operation SOLID SHIELD during the move. The squadron continued to fly the AV-8A and set an impressive record for combat readiness and reliability. During the period of July 1, 1977 through



June 30, 1979, VMA-542 was selected as the "Marine V/STOL Squadron of the Year" for two consecutive years.

- AV-8A "Harrier"

In support of Allied Forces in the Western Pacific, a six-plane detachment deployed to Kadena Airbase, Okinawa, Japan in August 1978. Upon return to the United States VMA-542 participated in Operation SOLID SHIELD-79. On May 19, 1979 during Operation SOLID SHIELD, VMA-542 was directed to conduct "surge" operations over a two-hour period. In that short time, six AV-8A's flew an unprecedented 42 sorties from MCALF Bogue expending 162 Mk81 "Snakeye" bombs on the G-10 impact area at Camp LeJeune. During this evolution, the "Tigers" broke the previously held world record for turn around time (Israel-7 min.) by averaging 6.4 minutes per aircraft for recovery, refuel, rearm and takeoff.



-542 AV-8B "Harrier II"
executing a vertical takeoff

April 1986 saw the end of the AV-8A/C models for VMA-542 as the "Tigers" transitioned to the new AV-8B Day Attack "Harrier II." Even more capable in V/STOL operations, the AV-8B extended the range and payload far beyond that of the AV-8A. The AV-8B "Harrier II" incorporated state of the art technology for its time involving both navigation and weapons delivery. The full transition to the "Harrier II" was complete by May 1986.

In August 1990, the "Tigers" deployed to the Island Emirate of Bahrain in support of Operation DESERT SHIELD. After three months at that location, the squadron deployed to King Abdul Aziz Naval Base, Jubail, Saudi Arabia as part of the most forward-deployed fixed wing group in theater.

Within twelve hours of arrival in Bahrain, "Tiger" pilots were standing 24-hour combat alerts. The alert status lasted until five hours after the commencement of Operation DESERT STORM on January 17, 1991 when the first division of VMA-542 "Harriers" launched to suppress Iraqi artillery positions in Southern Kuwait. From that day forward, "Tiger" Harriers conducted sustained combat operations until the end of hostilities on February 27, 1991.

A Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) briefing was given to all pilots on February 17th detailing the ground scheme of maneuver as well as the Wing plan for Close Air Support and Battlefield Air Interdiction. On February 22nd, two days prior to the initiation of the ground offensive, the "Tigers" of VMA-542 surged to a schedule of 58 sorties per day as the final battlefield preparation was initiated. These final prep fires included Mk77 Napalm delivered on trench lines in the area where the MEF breaching operation would occur. In addition, the "Tigers" continued targeting of enemy artillery and armor, which could be brought to bear against the Allies during their breaching operations.

Throughout these forty-two days of conflict the "Tigers" of VMA-542 flew more than 1000 combat sorties amassing over 1200 flight hours while delivering over one thousand tons of ordnance on the enemy. The "Harrier" was recognized by then Secretary of Defense Cohen as one of the three most important weapon systems of Desert Storm, and VMA-542 delivered more ordnance, flew more sorties, and accrued more combat hours than any other V/STOL squadron in theater.

The "Tigers" returned to MCAS Cherry Point in April 1991. Shortly thereafter the squadron faced its next major challenge as it was selected to introduce the new Radar/Night Attack AV-8B "Harrier II Plus" to the fleet in 1993. VMA-542 developed the Radar syllabus and trained the Marine Corps very first Radar "Harrier" pilots.

In the years that followed, VMA-542 participated in numerous joint and multi-national peacetime exercises that took them to Norway, Japan, Puerto Rico, and Canada. The "Tigers" also helped conduct testing on the "Litening I" targeting pod, which would later revolutionize the Harriers wartime capability by making it one of the most accurate bombing platforms in the world. VMA-542 marines attached to the 24th MEU briefly saw combat in 1999 when they flew 38 combat sorties in Kosovo while aboard the USS Nassau.

January 2003 arrived to find the "Tigers" preparing for war with Iraq for the second time in 12 years. Working through the holiday season, the squadron packed up and embarked aboard the USS Bataan. For the first time ever, a LHD class ship set sail with an entire squadron of 16 AV-8B II "Harriers." VMA-542 and the Air Department grew together on this historic first, progressing from 4-plane launches to 8-plane goes and eventually executing a 12-jet strike into Djibouti. After entering the North Arabian Gulf, VMA-223(-) was transferred from the USS Kearsarge to the USS Bataan, bringing the total number of Harriers working off Bataan's flight deck to 24. Starting March 5th, VMA-542 began supporting Operation Southern Watch/Force in order to enforce the Southern no fly and no move zones in Iraq. A total of 83 sorties were flown by the "Tigers" in support of the operation.



- A "Tiger" pilot prepares to launch off of the USS Bataan

On 19 March 2003, Operation Iraqi Freedom began as United States and United Kingdom forces conducted combat operations against Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. In the opening hours of the operation, VMA-542 launched Aerial Interdiction missions to shape the battlefield for the follow-on ground invasion by First Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF). Within days, with the help of Marine KC-130's and refuel/rearm in Al Jaber, Kuwait, the "Tigers" hit targets as far away as Al Kut in support of I MEF's advance toward Baghdad. Employing the Litening II targeting pod, the Tigers were able to locate, identify, and engage hostile targets with precision guided munitions without the assistance of external agencies.

After I MEF crossed the Kuwaiti-Iraqi border, the operational focus shifted from shaping missions to providing Close Air Support for coalition forces. As I MEF moved north into Iraq, the need for aerial refueling became increasingly important for Coalition aircraft. With an increasing shortage of available tankers, the "Harriers" expeditionary capabilities proved valuable once again as a Forward Operating Base (FOB) was established at An Numaniyah. The abandoned Iraqi air field allowed "Harriers" to land and refuel enroute to their mission. This capability allowed The "Tigers" to support I MEF as far north as Tikrit, over 400 miles away from the USS Bataan. On April 8, VMA-542 landed a section of aircraft at An Numaniyah at

night, marking the first tactical jet aircraft to touchdown on Iraqi soil.

As mid April approached operations slowed considerably with the squadron's tasking transitioning to fewer airborne missions and more ground alerts. Shortly after I MEF steamrolled into Baghdad, ordnance releases by the Tigers slowly came to a halt. When all was said and done, VMA-542 had dropped over 170,000 pounds of ordnance, flew over 600 combat sorties and 1000 combat hours from the USS Bataan in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. VMA-542 was awarded a Presidential Unit Citation for their actions in Iraq.

2004 was perhaps the greatest, most accomplished year for any "Tiger" squadron in its history. Having provided 6 jets to HMM-266, the squadron (-) simultaneously became the ready attack squadron on the East coast. On 18 February, HMM-266 aboard the USS Wasp (LHD-1) sailed to Afghanistan to continue the war on the Taliban and any who harbor terrorism. By May of that same spring, VMA-542 (-) was given a warning order to deploy to Al Asad Airbase in Iraq. This historic event would mark the first time an East Coast Attack Squadron had deployed to two fronts of war concurrently.

The detached Marines of HMM-266 arrived in theater on 11 April 2004 to support Taskforce LINEBACKER. The operational environment of Afghanistan was rugged and inhospitable for most aviation platforms; however, due to its unique flight capabilities, the "Harrier" proved invaluable to military operations. Operating out of Kandahar Airbase in Afghanistan, the Marines of the VMA-542 det carried out flight ops on a 7,000' runway at 3300' MSL altitude with an average temperature over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Originally a 10,000' Mig-21 runway, much of it had been destroyed or mined with explosives prior to their arrival. The remaining field that was usable was considered well below average by Western standards. In country from April to July, the "Harriers" of HMM-266 employed their 500lb Mk 82 and GBU-12 bombs, 5" Zuni rockets, and 25MM gun in support of not only Marines, but also US Army, Special Operation Forces, and the Afghan National Army. As a testament to the maintenance provided, upon completion of operations in country, the det "Harriers" had carried out over 1100 combat missions with only 4 cancellations. The maintenance departments' 7 days a week, 24 hours a day devotion was only mirrored by the dedication of VMA-542 Marines west of their position across the borders of Iran in Iraq.

While the det Marines of HMM-266 supported efforts in Afghanistan, a bigger fight loomed for the remaining Marines of VMA-542(-). On 13 May 2004, 10 VMA-542 "Harriers" flew across the Atlantic to take part in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM II. Always leaning into the fight, VMA-542(-) had begun combat operations by 20 May 2004. With insurgent violence spread throughout the country, the squadron brought the fight to the enemy with a total of 2,171 combat sorties. Those combat missions would amount to an astonishing 3952.3 combat hours in a period of six months. During their time in theater the Tigers flew primarily three types of missions: Armed Recce, Convoy Escort, and Close Air Support. Starting as a 10-jet squadron(-), VMA-542 had as many as 22 aircraft in Iraq as it was reinforced on two different occasions. By November of 2004, Iraqi insurgents had stepped up attacks throughout the country; however, no area was more violent than the city of Fallujah. The 7th marked the beginning of an eight-day operation launched by the U.S. Marines to quell the town and establish order among the populace. The "Tigers" delivered some of the first bombs during the operation resulting in

direct hits on high value targets by means of the Litening Pod. In total, VMA-542(-) REIN delivered over 10 tons of ordnance, 220 rounds of 25MM ammunition and flew over 300 combat hours during the eight-day evolution in Fallujah.



detachment - "Tiger" ordnance loading a JDAM aboard the USS Iwo Jima of "Harriers" dropped 17 precision guided

for a mission in support of Operation Enduring Freedom munitions and executed four separate strafing runs during their 150 combat sorties in Afghanistan. During this time, VMA-542's Boat detachment became the first USMC "Harrier" squadron to drop a GBU-38 Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) from a LHD class warship. Following their time in Afghanistan, the 24th MEU sailed to the Persian Gulf to support OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM. While there, the Marines of 542 flew 42 sorties in Basra, Iraq in support of British ground forces taking part in OPERATION MEDUSA.

Less than one year after the return of the HMM-365 det, VMA-542 currently finds itself proudly supporting the ground forces in Iraq for the fifth time in its history. With each return, and especially on this deployment, the "Tigers" find a more hopeful and peaceful Iraq than before. This is in no doubt due to the past sacrifices of our brothers-in-arms, and the resolve of the Iraqi people for a free and self-governing Iraq.

-VMA-542 in Iraq 2007

It would be less than two years before VMA-542 Marines found themselves serving in the Middle East again. After standing defensive combat alerts in August and September of 2006 for the 24th MEU's evacuation of non-combatants in Lebanon, the HMM-365 detachment of "Tigers" sailed to the coast of Pakistan to support the British, Dutch, Italian, and American forces by taking part in OPERATION MOUNTAIN FURY in support of OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM. In two weeks, the

